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## Spirituality and Catholicism: The Italian Experience

STEFANIA PALMISANO

**ABSTRACT** *At the start of the twenty-first century, Catholicism is still the prevailing belief system of most Italians, but a recent project on Italian religion and spirituality, carried out in 2006, has found that Italians are now more interested in spirituality, that they might describe themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious', and that they privilege the 'god within' rather than the transcendent God of traditional Catholic belief. This article presents the findings of The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project and focuses on what Italians mean by a 'spiritual life'. After an overview of the growing interest in spirituality in the Italian socio-cultural setting, various aspects are illustrated: Italians' self-assessments of religiosity and spirituality; meanings of spirituality; involvement in church and/or in holistic activities; various attitudinal variables, such as preference, beliefs, identification, and willingness to lead a religious and/or a spiritual life. A typology is then elaborated to study the profiles of four groups: (1) neither religious nor-spiritual; (2) religious, but not spiritual; (3) spiritual, but not religious; (4) both spiritual and religious. Two key concepts, intra-religious spirituality and extra-religious spirituality, are introduced to examine some of the ways in which spirituality finds expression in the context of contemporary Catholicism. After describing the different ways Italians understand the term 'spirituality', I identify three profiles of spirituality: 'ethic', 'religious', and 'inner-self'. Finally, the significance of the 'God within' is discussed, a phenomenon that is perhaps more readily associated with Protestant forms of holistic spiritualities, but is surprisingly also significant within Italian Catholicism.*

### Introduction

In the last decade, many studies of religion and religiosity have collected a considerable amount of information and statistics on the complexity and differentiation that characterises the state of Catholicism in Italy today (e.g. Abbruzzese; Cesareo et al.; Diotallevi; Garelli, *L'Italia cattolica*). Italian researchers (Garelli, Guizzardi and Pace)—who show that Catholicism is still the prevailing religion—have coined the expression 'peculiar pluralism' to claim that, although Italian society continues to portray itself as a relatively homogenous society in religious terms, Italian Catholics interpret their practical involvement with the Catholic Church in a variety of ways. This includes a number of ways of conceiving the meaning of belonging to the Church, varying forms of religious practice, and the fact that a belief system with which one identifies does not necessarily have an impact on one's social and individual life in any significant way. In 2006, a research team at the University

of Turin, consisting of Franco Garelli (director), Roberto Scalon and myself (full-time researchers), embarked on *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project*, with the aim of showing that, although alternatives spiritualities might be regarded as a predominantly Protestant phenomenon, such spiritualities are also significant within Italian Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> Data collection took place in the Winter of 2006, involving a survey by Eurisko, a private Italian Research Institute, which covered all of Italy. The sample of 3,160 individuals is representative of the Italian population of men and women whose ages range from 16 to 74 years.<sup>2</sup>

The novelty of *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006* (its findings appear in print for the first time),<sup>3</sup> when compared with previous surveys,<sup>4</sup> is that it investigated more thoroughly, at both the theoretical and the empirical level, the distinction between religion and spirituality, particularly looking at the meanings which Italians attach to the term 'spirituality'. Additionally, this study contributes to the recent and now rapidly growing research on spirituality in a number of European countries by exploring its quantitative significance. Several questions were asked (through telephone random sampling) using the wording of previous surveys to enable comparison over time. New questions were designed to increase our understanding of innovations in the religious scene. Above all, these questions made it possible to explore the distribution and content of spirituality among the Italian population. Such an analysis involved a wide range of new items and indicators, including self-assessment of religiosity and spirituality; meanings of spirituality; involvement in church and/or holistic activities; various attitudinal variables, such as preference, beliefs, identification, and willingness to lead a religious and/or a spiritual life.

The main topic of this article is thus an exploration of what Italians mean by 'spiritual life'. After providing an overview of the growing interest in spirituality in the Italian socio-cultural setting, the article illustrates the findings from the survey data which the research team gathered on spirituality: Italians' self-assessment of religiosity and spirituality; their relationship with institutionalised religion, their opinion of traditional religious authorities and the statements of these authorities regarding truth and salvation; their involvement in church and holistic activities, and their quest for spiritual growth. Based on the findings of Italians' self-assessment of religiosity and spirituality, a typology is formulated to study the profiles of four groups: those (1) neither religious nor spiritual; (2) religious, but not spiritual; (3) spiritual, but not religious; (4) both spiritual and religious. Two key concepts, *intra-religious spirituality* and *extra-religious spirituality*, are introduced to examine some of the ways in which spirituality finds expression in the context of contemporary Catholicism. After describing the different ways in which Italians understand the term 'spirituality', three types of spirituality are identified: 'ethic', 'religious', and 'inner-self'. Finally, the significance of the notion of 'God within' is discussed, a phenomenon that is perhaps more readily associated with Protestant forms of holistic spiritualities, but that is surprisingly also significant within Italian Catholicism: 36% of Italians declared in the research on moral and religious pluralism (RAMP survey of 1998) that 'God is something within each person and in nature'.

### Contemporary Interest in Spirituality

As in many other European countries (see Heelas and Woodhead; Houtman and Aupers, "Oriental Religion"; Ketola; Lynch), the language of spirituality has recently come into its own in Italy. Expressions like 'mind-body-spirit' (90 *mente, corpo, spirito*) have entered popular consciousness. Yoga, reiki, shiatsu, aromatherapy, naturopathy, osteopathy, and other forms of holistic practice have become more widespread in the past decade. Even a cursory glance around the local bookshop or a stroll through the shopping centre leaves little doubt that Italians' interest in these matters is increasing. Further, in 2006, (95 "Spiritualsearch", the first specialised Italian web site specifically oriented towards spiritual content, was created. It provides many links, not only to the web sites of different religious traditions, but also to mediums, clairvoyants, spirit guides, and other spiritual services. In addition, there are sections dedicated to a range of spiritual practices and to subjects such as astrology, divination, and esoterism. (100

This snapshot does not necessarily indicate that growing attention to and participation in the 'holistic milieu' or 'alternative spiritualities' mean an increase in the 'spiritual quest'. Many who are active in these areas do not consider their practices or their interests to be of spiritual significance. (105 However, many others do. What is indisputable is the evidence which shows the turn towards a "person-centred" or "subjective-centred" culture (Taylor). According to Heelas and Woodhead, such a shift in the sacred sphere is associated with spirituality, the sacred serving the cultivation of a unique subjective life.

The increasing emphasis on a 'subjective-centred' culture has emerged in many areas: in the cultures of health (with person-centred complementary and alternative medicine), work (the turn towards the personal development of employees, including more care for their well-being), education (the introduction of organic food in school meals and the presence of alternative (115 and complementary therapists who provide natural health care for staff and students), and purchasing. As in other European countries, in Italy, most of the findings and knowledge about this topic are based on qualitative research. However, some statistical data are available from surveys concerning alternative therapies and the well-being business.

The figures shown in the last *Multiscopo* inquiry ("Conditions of health and the use of health services 1999–2000") demonstrate that, between 1991 and 1999, the number of Italians who used alternative therapies nearly doubled. In 1999, approximately 9 million Italians (16% of the population) claimed they had used alternative therapies in the three years preceding the interview.<sup>5</sup> Later studies (125 of complementary and alternative medicine (Giarelli, Roberti di Sarsina and Silvestrini) show that homeopathy is the most frequently used, followed by various versions of massage, herbal therapy, and acupuncture.

Holistic spirituality is also becoming increasingly important in the area of well-being. The fitness well-being sector has expanded enormously in the last (130 few years. Its multiple fields emerge from the infectious effect of consumer models and fashionable ideologies and philosophies: plastic surgery, aesthetic medicine, various schools of massage, organic food, complementary and alternative medicine, recycling, and much more. In addition, according to the

Italian Association of Wellness, there is an increasing interest in weekends,  
135 holidays, and even hour-long sessions at spas, ayurvedic resorts, and health  
farms. This has resulted in about 24,000 wellness centres in Italy, counting  
18 million customers the last year.<sup>6</sup>

Equally important are the seminars, training courses, and workshops of soft  
capitalism, which are more concerned with the personal qualities of participants  
140 than with abstract or functional procedures. The new imperative in human  
resources management, particularly in the area of customer service, is  
developing employees' "emotional intelligence" (Goleman). For instance, the  
Italian banking system offers courses which teach employees how to be more  
empathetic towards people to improve relationships with customers. In 2005, the  
145 SanPaolo bank (now Intesa-SanPaolo, after a merger) developed a human  
resources management project called "Building the Future on People's Own  
Values and Souls" for their employees. This included an empowerment course  
called "Managerial Identity: A Feminine Route", for women employees, aimed at  
improving self-esteem and employees' ways of 'living the work'. In these lessons,  
150 the theoretical aspects related to "how to augment one's self-esteem", supported  
by relaxation techniques, yoga, and autogenic-training exercises.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers from several European countries are taking the study of  
spirituality on board. In fact, Heelas ("Challenging") suggests that the  
sociology of religion should be renamed the 'sociology of religion and  
155 spirituality'. However, students of sociology of religion in Italy have only  
recently adopted the concept of spirituality (Garelli, Guizzardi and Pace;  
Giordan, "Dalla religione"; *Tra religione*). Although Italian sociologists pointed  
out some elements which would now be referred to as 'spirituality' in the  
mid-1980s, it is only since 2003 that they have begun to make explicit use of  
160 this concept. Garelli (see Garelli, Guizzardi and Pace) was the first to use it to  
describe the Italian situation. However, as we will see, when analysing the  
figures for Italy in the research on the moral and religious pluralism of Italians  
(RAMP survey of 1998), he argues that the inclination of Italians to consider  
themselves as 'religious' is more common than their inclination to interpret life  
165 in spiritual terms.

However, the considerable changes in the public sphere described above make  
it clear that there is a pressing need to develop new research strategies, including  
additions to questionnaires, in order to (i) further refine the heuristic range of the  
concept of spirituality and (ii) pay increased attention to the state of spirituality  
170 in Italy.

Indeed, ten years have passed since the RAMP study. What has changed in the  
meantime? Do Italians still regard themselves as more 'religious' than 'spiritual'?  
What kind of 'spiritual life' do Italians seem to live? *The Italian Religion and  
Spirituality Project 2006* aimed to address these questions by means of a wide  
175 range of new items and indicators. I shall now provide an outline of the most  
significant findings from the survey.

### Indications of Spirituality in the Survey Data

Following the RAMP questionnaire of 1998, *The Italian Religion and Spirituality  
Project 2006* asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they considered



**Table 1.** Self-assessment of Religiosity and Spirituality: Comparison between 1998 and 2006 (%).

	religious person			spiritual person		
	% 2006	% 1998	p %	% 2006	% 1998	p %
not at all/a little	25	21	+4	23	28	-5
medium/high	73	78	-5	74	68	+6
I don't understand the question.	2	1	+1	3	4	-1
Total	100	100		100	100	

(N2006 = 3160; N1998 = 2149)

Sources: RAMP 1998; *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006*.

180 themselves to be religious and to have a spiritual life. They were asked, on  
a Likert scale ranging from 7, if they definitely thought of themselves as  
religious/spiritual (1 if they definitely did not). Table 1 summarises the  
responses in comparison with RAMP.

185 As Table 1 indicates, at the end of the 1990s, the share of Italians who  
considered themselves to be quite/very religious was significantly higher  
than the share of those who regarded themselves as being quite/very spiritual  
(78% vs. 68%). In 2006, the figures show a more equal ratio. The percentage of  
those who consider themselves to be quite or very religious (73%) is roughly the  
same as the percentage of those who admit that their life is characterised by  
190 medium or high spirituality (74%).

Moreover, in comparison with RAMP 1998 (Garelli, Guizzardi and Pace), the  
percentage of respondents who identify themselves as medium to highly  
religious diminished by 5 percentage points, whereas the percentage of those  
who claim to lead a spiritual life has risen by 6 percentage points. At the same  
195 time, the share of those who claim not to be religious or to be only a little religious  
increased (from 21% in 1998 to 25% in 2006); the share of those who do not lead  
a spiritual life decreased (from 28% in 1998 to 23% in 2006).

Although the majority of the sample (59%) shows little or no interest in  
searching for the 'spiritual', 31% of interviewees declare that they are  
200 interested in spiritual matters and feel a greater need to cultivate a spiritual  
life now than they did in the past. Only 11% say they feel less of a need to do so.

In order to describe how Italians address spirituality, it is useful to focus on the  
relationship between religion, spirituality, and institutionalised organisations.  
Can a spiritual life be led independently from organised religion? More than  
205 80% of respondents believe that this is possible, whereas only 19% are not at  
all or only a little convinced of this. Although more than three quarters of  
respondents think that no anchorage with official institutions is necessary for  
leading a spiritual life, almost 66% believe that it is important to be part of a  
church or a religious community in order to grow spiritually; 36% do not agree or  
210 do not think it is important. Remarkably, roughly half of Italians agree with the  
statement that one can lead a spiritual life without believing in the Christian God.  
Exploring this finding a little further, 27% of regular worshippers (that is, those  
who attend mass at least once a week) claim that the 'spiritual search' can be led



independently of belief in God; if we consider those who attend mass at least one  
a month, the share increases to 66%.

A sceptical attitude towards traditional religious authorities is also clearly  
evident when one looks at the results of the questionnaire items on truth and  
salvation. Only 23% express any agreement with the statement "only one religion  
is true". Despite statements from the Vatican affirming the absolute truth  
of Catholicism, more than three quarters of respondents disagreed with  
this statement. Roughly two thirds affirm that "everybody can be saved  
independently from being religious and independently from the particular  
religion they belong to". Finally, more than half of respondents agree with the  
statement "it would be better if there were only one religion based on the main  
beliefs of all religions, able to join together Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and  
other believers".

It is also important to note some statistics concerning involvement in 'holistic  
activities', seminars, courses, training, and reading about alternative spiritualities  
as well as interest in new religious movements. In answer to the question "Which  
of these activities have you practised in the past years?", 9% affirm they read  
texts or participated in meetings on "Eastern religions, philosophies and  
spiritualities"; 4% participated in seminars on "New Age and New Religious  
Movements" (at least occasionally); 6% participated in 'holistic activities',  
such as yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Zen, etc. (at least occasionally).  
In comparison with the figures shown by the project *Religiosità in Italia* of 1994,  
there is a slight increase of interest in these themes and in group participation.<sup>8</sup>

Although these data provide evidence that the 'holistic milieu' has grown, they  
do not necessarily mean a commensurate increase in the number of people who  
have been attracted to spirituality over the past years. Many of those attracted to  
these activities could be looking for subjective well-being and thus be totally  
disinterested in the spirituality of the practices. In order to distinguish between  
practitioners who are spiritually engaged and those who are interested for other  
reasons, we must focus on the respondents' motivations for involvement in new  
spiritual activities. The majority (49%) are prompted by an interest in cultural  
enrichment—learning about other ways of life, perhaps because it's fashionable,  
perhaps to broaden the mind, perhaps in the spirit of tourism. Another 30% are  
looking for spiritual growth; 27% want to satisfy their curiosity; 12% hope to meet  
people who have the same interest; 10% aim to overcome stress and break their  
daily routine; 9% hope for help through difficult periods; 8% attend simply for  
fun. The analysis of the questionnaire findings suggests that, for many, the desire  
for a spiritual quest is present, but it is accompanied by a strong cultural interest  
and by curiosity as to what these practices are all about.

Regarding the social milieu and the social-demographic groups which exhibit a  
higher affinity with such activities, the figures show that women are a little more  
active than men. Secondly, cultural and spiritual interest as well as participation  
in the holistic milieu are more widespread in North Italy. Further, those involved  
are predominantly between 36 and 45 years old. As for educational background,  
returns from the questionnaire show that the majority has a university or  
secondary school degree.

Having presented survey data which demonstrate the increased of importance  
of spirituality, I now want to address the following question in more detail: what  
interpretation can be made based on this information? Even though it seems that

**Table 2.** Cross Tabulation of Self-assessment of Religiosity and Spirituality (%).

		"Do you have a spiritual life?"		
		NO	YES	Total
"Do you consider yourself a religious person?"	Not religious	23	8	31
	I am religious	5	64	69
	Total	28	72	100

N = 2171

Source: *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006.*

Italians are now more interested in spirituality than they were in the past, the data do not lead to the conclusion that religion is giving way to spirituality, nor that these categories are mutually exclusive. It is not necessarily the case that there is a sharp distinction between those who identify themselves as religious and those who claim to lead a spiritual life. The statistical analysis which shows the percentages of Italians who claim to be "religious" and/or "spiritual" (see Table 2), confirms that there is much overlap between the two groups, proving that religion and spirituality need not be two different and incompatible worlds.

In response to the questions "Do you consider yourself a religious person?" and "Do you have a spiritual life?", those with a Likert ranking of 1–3 appear as 'not religious/spiritual' and those with a ranking of 5–7 appear as 'religious/spiritual' (see Table 2). Where respondents entered the neutral value of 4 in one or both their answers, they were removed from the calculation.<sup>9</sup> Over two thirds (69%) of the remaining respondents consider themselves religious and roughly three quarters (72%) think they have some kind of spiritual life. A quarter (26%) of the non-religious and 93% of the religious consider themselves to be spiritual.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, most of the discussion will now focus on the four groups of respondents (presented in Table 2) who clearly fall into one of four categories: (1) neither religious, nor spiritual ('neither' = 23%); (2) religious, but not spiritual ('only religious' = 5%); (3) spiritual, but not religious ('only spiritual' = 8%); and (4) both spiritual and religious ('both' = 64%).

In two American studies (Zinnbauer et al.; Marler and Hadaway), the "both spiritual and religious" group was compared with the "spiritual, but not religious" group; the former was more likely to attend church and follow its teaching and doctrine, while the latter was more similar to the "highly active seekers" described by Roof. Such 'spiritual seekers' are reported to be exploring the world's storehouse of faiths and spiritualities for a variety of meaning systems and practices with which to experiment, in order to find those that meet their needs. They may also be hostile to traditional or organised religion *per se*.

At the most general level, the questions I pursue now for the Italian sample arise from these findings. Further details are provided about the composition of the four groups in order to point out some defining features of their religious and spiritual attitudes and practices.

**Table 3.** Belief in God: “Which of these statements comes nearest to your own belief about the existence of God?”/one choice (%).

	neither religious nor spiritual	religious, but not spiritual	spiritual but not religious	both spiritual and religious
I believe that God does not exist	21	3	16	2
I have no interest in the existence of God	22	4	15	1
I believe in a higher power or life force	11	3	19	1
I believe in God from time to time	18	15	16	4
I believe in God with some doubt	21	25	26	19
I believe in God without any doubt	7	50	8	73
Total	100	100	100	100
N = 2171				

Source: *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006*.

### Profiles

Regarding *gender and age*, as one might expect, there is a clear gender difference when respondents were asked if they considered themselves religious or spiritual (76% of women define themselves as “both spiritual and religious”, compared to 56% of men, while 34% of men regard themselves as “neither religious nor spiritual”, compared to 13% of women). However, there is almost no difference between males and females who consider themselves “only religious” or “only spiritual”. With regard to age, respondents under the age of 29 are most likely to call themselves “only spiritual”. In fact, the share of the young (aged 18–29) who think they are “more spiritual than religious” (10%) is more than double the share of the elderly (aged 66–74) who think so (4%). While the option “only religious” increases with age, 83% of the elderly define themselves as “both spiritual and religious”. Similarly, the option “neither religious nor spiritual” unites 31% of the young (aged 18–29), but only 12% of the elderly (66–74 aged).

Predictably, *church attendance*<sup>10</sup> is higher for the “both spiritual and religious” group (68% attend at least once a month) than for the “religious, but not spiritual” group (44% attend at least once a month). On the other hand, 60% of “only spiritual” group never go to church, nor do 57% of those who regard themselves as “neither religious nor spiritual”.

More interesting are the findings from the questions about *religious beliefs*. Concerning belief in God, 73% of those who reported to be “both spiritual and religious” believe in the Christian God without any doubt, while 23% of them believe in God with some doubt pertaining to God’s existence. The share of those who believe in God without any doubt decreases to 50% among the “religious, but not spiritual” group: 40% believe in God with some doubt. Among the “only spiritual” group, 42% believe in the Christian God, but with some doubt regarding God’s existence, whereas 19% believe in a higher power or life force that does not correspond to the Christian God. As expected, 54% of those who are “neither religious nor spiritual” do not believe in God or have no interest in this matter.

**Table 4.** Life after death: "What happens to us after death?" /one choice (%).

	neither religious nor spiritual	religious, but not spiritual	spiritual, but not religious	both spiritual and religious
Nothing—death is the end.	38	9	30	5
There is something, but I don't know what.	25	25	20	15
It is not possible to know what happens to us after death.	26	35	28	17
After death there is a new life.	9	28	15	57
We are reincarnated—that is, after our physical death, we are born in this world over and over again.	1	3	6	4
Other	1	—	1	2
Total	100	100	100	100

N = 2171

Source: *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006.*

Equally important is belief in Jesus Christ. It is remarkable that 40% of the "spiritual, but not religious" respondents do not believe at all in the statement that "Jesus Christ is God's son" and that 44% of them do not believe at all in his resurrection. These figures are higher than those relating to the "neither religious nor spiritual" group: 32% do not believe in the statement that "Jesus Christ is God's son" and 37% do not believe in his resurrection.

Regarding the conception of death, the "spiritual, but not religious" group is most likely to opt for reincarnation (6%). Many more (30%) choose the option "Nothing. Death is the end"; 28% opt for "It is not possible to know what happens to us after death". Table 4 shows respondents' answers to the question of what they think is likely to happen to them after they die.

#### *Opinions about Religious Pluralism*

Italians who reported that they are "only spiritual" are most likely to opt for the idea that "people should be free to mix and match different religious traditions and practices" (31%, compared to 13% of those who consider themselves as "both spiritual and religious"). They also disagree more frequently with the question: "Do you think that it is good that missionaries spread the message of their religion to other cultures?" (74%, compared to 35% of those who regard themselves as "both spiritual and religious"). Further, the majority in this group think that "anybody can be saved because salvation doesn't exist" (48%). By contrast, those who regard themselves as "only religious" are most likely to opt for the idea that "it would be better to take root in their own faith and religion rather than searching for other ones" (80%). Similarly, 78% of those who say they are "both spiritual and religious" think so.

#### *Opinions about Spirituality*

Among those who agree with the item "Could a spiritual life be led independently from organised religion?", the proportion who report that they

are “neither religious nor spiritual” is the same as for those who regard themselves as “both spiritual and religious” (78%). This figure is lower for the “religious, but not spiritual” group (65%), but rises to 97% among the “spiritual, but not religious” group. The latter is also most likely to opt for the statement that “it’s possible to lead a spiritual life independently from God”. Only 35% of the “religious, but not spiritual” respondents agree, a little more than those who are “both religious and spiritual” (31%). Not unexpectedly, but still significantly, the “spiritual, but not religious” group is the most engaged in “holistic activities” and “meetings on alternative spiritualities”. It should be noted that, although it seems that those who are “only spiritual” are more likely to collect ideas, styles, and practices from multiple traditions, they do not usually import practices, images or symbols belonging to different religions into everyday life. It thus seems that the openness to learn about different religions or spiritualities—to be a spiritual tourist—is more connected to spheres of knowledge than to spheres of experience. This inclination could also be supported by the fact that, as shown above, roughly half of those who are attracted by “holistic proposals” are motivated by an interest in cultural enrichment.

The data described above suggest further thoughts. As seen in this section, some of the 8% of Italians who reported that they were “a spiritual person”, but not a “religious person”, almost certainly had in mind an idea of spirituality which is far from religion: the great majority of this group never attend church. However, a small group who are “only spiritual” attend church at least once a month. For them, “spiritual, but not religious” could be not an actual rejection of religion, but a reminder to sustain spiritual vitality within traditional religion. Besides, many people might prefer to define themselves as ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’, because ‘religion’ is felt to be too dogmatic, intolerant, associated with hierarchy, and perhaps dangerous. Finally, it should be borne in mind that many respondents (10%) who regard themselves to be “only spiritual” are under 29 years old. According to Smith and Denton, they might use this category not to distance themselves from organised religion *per se*, but to emphasise the importance of a personally meaningful faith that can also be practised in the context of organised religion.

Although the percentage of those who identify themselves as “a religious person”, but not “a spiritual person” (5%) is not all that helpful in ascertaining what spirituality means, it helps us to discern something about the characteristics of what is being rejected. The group who is “only religious” may well include conservative Catholics who are highly suspicious of ‘spirituality’, because they associate it with the idea of the ‘New Age’. Thus, even considering the experiential dimension of their faith, they regard themselves as “only religious” because of fearing to be confused with the “spiritual seekers”—the easy prey of spiritual relativism which Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly condemned. Moreover, many Italians might define themselves as “only religious”, because, although now totally or partially disengaged from religion, they were born in a Catholic country, attended Catholic schools, youth groups, and oratories, went to mass, had Communion and Confirmation, and married in a Catholic church. They feel that they belong to Catholicism—as an important aspect of the Italian way of life—but they are not officially or formally members. For them, belonging to Catholicism is an ethnic and

cultural rather than a religious membership (Garelli, *Forza*). This suggestion  
405 is supported by the figure for church attendance: among the “only religious”,  
the majority attends mass at most once a year, while only a small group attends at  
least once a week.

To conclude this section, a brief summary of the key findings so far: (1) the  
language of spirituality has entered Italian popular consciousness and there is  
410 much evidence to lead to the conclusion that Italians are now much more  
interested in what spirituality is about than they were in the past. Firstly, the  
percentage of those who admit that their lives are characterised by medium to  
high spirituality (74%) is now roughly the same as that of those who consider  
themselves to be quite or very religious (73%). Secondly, 31% of Italians declare  
415 that they now have a greater need to cultivate a spiritual life than they had in the  
past. Thirdly, compared to 1994, there is a slight increase in interest in meetings,  
reading, etc., which involves alternative spiritualities, and in participation in  
the holistic milieu. Finally, the range of the well-being culture and references  
to holistic practices, way of life, and thinking has increased in many areas,  
420 whether health or work, consumption or school; this may not be reliable  
evidence of ‘belief’ in spirituality, but is indicative of such interest among  
teachers, holistic spa owners, etc.<sup>11</sup> This raises the question whether spirituality  
will become culturally more influential in the coming years. (2) At least two types  
of spirituality emerge from the questionnaire responses: one associated with  
425 religion, the other not associated with religion.

### Distinguishing Spiritualities

As discussed, Italians have shown an increases interest in the quest for  
‘spirituality’. This evidence directs us to the major questions of this article.  
430 In a nation where Catholicism is the prevailing religion and where there are  
few atheists, why do so many use the language of spirituality? Further, why  
do 8% of Italians consider themselves as “only spiritual”? More generally  
speaking, what is meant by ‘spirituality’ in the different contexts in which it  
is used?

As indicated, the concept gives rise to problems of interpretation. It certainly  
435 seems to be associated with a plethora of meanings: it means different things to  
different people. In line with Zinnbauer et al.’s findings for the US, some see it  
as complementary to religion, others in opposition to religion, and yet others  
understand the two concepts as having a more complicated relationship, with  
one encompassing or overlapping with the other. With respect to the findings  
440 for Italy, it is important to distinguish between two fundamentally different kinds  
of spirituality, as shown in this study: (a) we might call the former ‘intra-religious  
spirituality’—in Italy’s case, ‘Catholic spirituality’. This *presumes that the religious  
experience is linked with the sacred which is and remains ‘external to’ and ‘higher’ or ‘out  
there’ (typically the Christian God)*. Three logical possibilities can be derived from  
445 this (see Table 5): spiritual life reliant on God, spiritual life reliant on the Church,  
spiritual life reliant on both. It could be suggested that people who define  
themselves as “both spiritual and religious” predominantly lead a spiritual life  
linked to God and the Church.



**Table 5.** Spirituality: Logical possibilities.

degree of spirituality	logical possibilities
intra-religious spirituality	reliant on God reliant on Church reliant on God and Church
extra-religious spirituality	independent of both

**Table 6.** Selected responses, ranked in order of frequency, to the question “What does the word ‘spirituality’ mean to you?”.

“What does the word ‘spirituality’ mean to you?”
1. To strive for a state of harmony and inner peace in yourself and in the others
2. Seeking the meaning of life
3. Seeking the inner self, developing your spiritual qualities
4. Seeking to be a good person, lead a good life
5. Belief in God, following his teachings
6. To help others and give your time to others
7. To be able to distinguish between right and wrong
8. Belief in higher, transcendent power, something beyond oneself
9. To affirm sense of personal worth, to affirm one’s capabilities in everyday life
10. Going to church and following its expectations

Source: *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006*.

(b) By contrast, the latter might be called ‘*extra-religious spirituality*’ and referred to as a form of spirituality that is associated neither with the Church nor with God, as represented by theistic Christianity (see Table 5).

In order to analyse which concept of spirituality Italians have in mind and to suggest what a more detailed interpretation could explore, I focus on the responses to the question “What does the word ‘spirituality’ mean to you?”.

Provided with a list of characterisations based on Gallup and Jones (49), respondents were asked to say if these were related to the meaning of spirituality.<sup>12</sup> Italians’ responses are summarised in Table 6, ranked in order of frequency.

About 88% attach the following meaning to ‘spirituality’: “To strive for a state of harmony and inner peace in yourself and in others”; only 51% select “Going to church and following its expectations”.

The findings from the statistical analysis, which we carried out in the search of possible meanings of the term ‘spirituality’, are arresting. Principal Components Analysis reveals three dimensions.<sup>13</sup> I call the first factor *ethic spirituality*, because it is predominantly associated with the following items: “To try to be a good person and to lead a good life”, “To demonstrate one’s value and one’s capabilities in everyday life”, “To help others and give your time to others”, “To be able to distinguish between right and wrong”. I define the second factor *religious spirituality*, because it is related to the items: “To believe in God and follow his teachings”, “To believe in a higher, transcendent power”, “To go to Church and to follow its expectations”. The third factor is *inner-self*



(or inner-life) spirituality. It is linked with the items: "To strive for a state of harmony and internal peace in yourself and in others", "To look for your inner self, to develop your spiritual qualities", "To look for the meaning of life".

475 The main ideas that Italians associate with the meaning of 'spirituality' thus relate to three profiles: *ethic spiritualities*, *religious spiritualities*, and *inner-self or inner-life spiritualities*. These profiles do not necessarily describe what goes on 'out there'. They are analytic tools intended to facilitate the comparison of ways of thinking about—and perhaps ways of living—spirituality. They appear  
480 as clusters where individuals and groups may belong in one category in many respects, but neither individuals nor groups always neatly fit any one type. Further, each cluster could be combined with other clusters.

The three profiles can be described in further details as follows. Firstly, by definition, *religious spiritualities* are spiritual forms of an intra-religious kind.  
485 It is evident from the analysis of the profile that this kind of spirituality is the closest to 'traditional religion'. This conception of the divine involves a God who is essentially located beyond this world, acting upon this world and life within it. The root experiences of religious spiritualities could be, for instance, temporary retreats for religious exercises in monasteries, churches, and abbeys or trips  
490 in the natural environment to admire God's creation (see Flanagan's notion of 'Visual Spirituality', 219). All these experiences enable believers to enter into an intense relationship with the divine—who is and remains transcendent, separate from the believer, over and above the self. According to Heelas's distinction ("Spiritual Revolution" 3), three forms of religious spirituality can be pointed  
495 out, which might help explain the varieties of religious spirituality, in which Italians are involved:

- transcendent spirituality or mystical experiences as ineffable events which confirm the truth of religious orthodoxy
- holy spirituality, which is the experience of the indwelling Holy Spirit; it  
500 is very common among Italians influenced by Charismatic or Pentecostal movements
- theistic humanism, a form of experiencing relationships with God's creations, which is very common in believers who emphasise the human values and sentiments of their faith rather than abstract doctrines and  
505 dogmas

Secondly, *ethic spiritualities* are connected to the ethical dimensions or meanings of life; they concern the basic attributes, capacities, capabilities, potential of individuals, and communal life. The analysis of this profile shows that the nature of the spiritual life of those who define spirituality mainly in this way  
510 is linked to their own qualities, such as goodness, creativity, sense of right and wrong, authenticity, wisdom, and sensitivity. The data from the Italian study do not point to a clear difference between the genders; nevertheless, it can be said that ethic spiritualities increase with age. Concerning the relationship with religion, many individuals who adhere to ethic spirituality seem to refer  
515 to religion in an ethnic, cultural or national way. For them, in addition to representing 'true' membership, anchorage in the Catholic Church predominantly serves to provide something akin to 'a sacred canopy', to which they refer in ordinary life or on special occasions. It could be suggested that, for some, ethic spirituality is basically intra-religious in nature, albeit with less

emphasis on obedience to the theistic Godhead than is typical of theistic humanism. For others, the emphasis lies with the extra-religious—the cultural, for example. For yet others, a mixture is clearly in evidence. At least this is the working hypothesis.

Thirdly, *inner-self or inner-life spiritualities* do not just simply involve ‘unchurched spirituality’, but also ‘non-Christian/theistic spirituality’. These terms refer more closely to the concept described in the social-scientific literature as ‘New Age spiritualities’ or ‘Alternative Spiritualities’ (see Partridge). Most participants in the New Age milieu, it is argued, collect an apparently incoherent set of spiritual ideas and practices, which draw upon multiple traditions. New Age is thus described as a ‘do-it-yourself religion’, ‘pick-and-mix religion’ or a ‘spiritual supermarket’ (see Houtman and Aupers, “Spiritual Supermarket”). Yet beneath much of that heterogeneity is a remarkable constancy: the same *lingua franca* (to use Heelas’s useful expression), the language of *Self-spirituality*. The great refrain of the language of the self is that it is fundamental to break away from mainstream society and culture to experience owning one’s ‘authentic’, ‘natural’ or ‘real’ self. Regarding the Italian situation, these kinds of attitudes and sensitivities are better described as ‘inner-self or inner-life spiritualities’ instead of ‘New Age spiritualities’. Inner-self or inner-life spiritualities comprise a variety of spirituality that concerns the force, energy or vitality that sustains life itself; they are bound up with the subjective life of each individual and his/her own self. In this sense, ‘inner-self or inner-life spiritualities’ can be distinguished from ‘religious spiritualities’: the latter are associated with life lived according to the will of God, as a member of a community or a religious tradition, where what matters is obeying, heeding and pursuing ways of life in conformity to external expectations; the former are associated with life lived in close connection with the own unique self that thus became the main source of authority and significance (Heelas, “Spiritual Revolution” 3–4).

Analysis of inner-self or inner-life spirituality profiles allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of these varieties of spirituality. First of all, two thirds of Italians who associate spirituality with ‘inner-self or inner-life spiritualities’ think that one can lead a spiritual life without believing in the Christian God. Predictably, the *unchurched* (Hunt 159) show a very low level of religious spirituality, but show instead a high level of inner-self or inner-life spiritualities. In addition, according to the gender puzzle, which Woodhead summarises in the question “Why so many women in holistic spirituality?” (120), the data reveal that inner-life spiritualities are much more in evidence in women than in men. Regarding age and education, younger people and those with higher levels of education show a higher level of affinity with this kind of spirituality than the older generations and those with lower levels of education.

### The ‘God within’ ...

Three different profiles of spirituality have been described above. One further issue needs to be raised. If religious spiritualities are related to the Christian God, which image of the divine (if there is one) can be supposed to be associated with

inner-self or inner-life spiritualities and also with ethic spiritualities? To answer this question, it seems useful to start with the answers to the question about the images of God, to which Italians responded in RAMP 1998. Although it is ten years old, this is the only existing set of data which specifically concerns Italians' opinions about the nature of God. It addresses them in three different ways: (1) It shows the most widespread images of God in Italy; (2) it enables us to point out which image of the divine is preferred by people who regard themselves as "both spiritual and religious", "spiritual, but not religious", "religious, but not spiritual" or "neither religious nor spiritual"; and (3), it suggests which image of God could be predominantly associated with inner-self or inner-life spiritualities and ethic spiritualities.

The RAMP 1998 data reveal that the largest group of Italians (50%) believes "in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship", followed—unexpectedly—by 36% who believe "that God is something within each person and in nature". Only 5% do not believe in any kind of God or life force and 7% believe in a higher power or spirit that does not correspond to the Christian God. It is absolutely extraordinary that more than a third of Italians associate the divine with an entity that does not correspond to the Christian God, but is, by contrast, immanent and cosmic: 'the god within' is thought to be an integral part of the human being, who may, in turn, be conceptualised as an integral part of nature and/or of the cosmos ('in nature').

The answers of the four groups ("both spiritual and religious", "spiritual, but not religious", "religious, but not spiritual", "neither religious nor spiritual") to the same question (Table 7) point to a pattern which clearly supports the supposition that God means something different to them.

**Table 7.** Concept of God: "Which of these statements comes nearest to your own belief?", one choice (%).

	neither religious nor spiritual	religious but not spiritual	spiritual but not religious	both spiritual and religious
I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship.	21	50	20	67
I believe in a higher power or life force that does not correspond to the Christian God.	16	5	18	2
I believe that God is something within each person and in nature.	37	43	46	30
I don't believe in any kind of God, spirit or life force.	20	1	14	0
I really don't know what to believe.	6	1	2	1
Total	100	100	100	100
N = 1390				

Source: RAMP 1998.

Of those who say they are “both religious and spiritual”, over two thirds believe in the Christian God. They appear to be religious in the more traditional sense than the respondents who are “religious, but not spiritual”; they think of the divine as both the theistic God (50%) and the immanent (43%). By contrast, the relative majority of those who think of themselves as “only spiritual” believe in the “god within and in nature” (46%). The conceptualisations of God of those who regard themselves as “neither religious nor spiritual” (those who have an image of the divine) are very different: they vary from the theistic God, the ‘god within’ to a “higher power that does not correspond to the Christian God”.

These data lead to the following hypothesis: the image of the divine is connected to 1. “religious spiritualities”, 2. “inner-self or inner life-spiritualities”, and 3. “ethic spiritualities”. This would allow us to draw a map of spirituality within the sacred sphere of Italy.

It is clear that the first group (“both religious and spiritual”), who mainly believe in a transcendent God, is the home of “religious spiritualities”. If situated on a spectrum that maps the degree of movement from traditional mainstream, this is probably the most orthodox position. Every variety of these spiritualities (transcendent spirituality, holy spirituality, theistic humanism) is understood to emanate from the transcendent realm to serve life in this world.

The opposite position—the “only spiritual” group—is the most heterodox in terms of belief in God. It could be supposed that those who predominantly believe in the “god within and in nature” attach the meaning of spirituality mostly to what I call ‘inner-self or inner-life spiritualities’. For them, the meaningful nature of spiritual life is about living life in authentic connection with the inner depth of their unique self. Their goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to become their own authority. Thus inner-self or inner-life spiritualities might be related with a divine that is “within and in nature”, immanent and cosmic. According to Lynch, who states that this notion of the divine can take either pantheist or panentheist forms, inner-self or inner-life spiritualities promote the sacralisation of nature as the site of divine presence and activity in the cosmos as well as the sacralisation of the self. *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project 2006* reveals a pattern which clearly supports the supposition that among those who understand spirituality as “inner self or inner life spiritualities”, 10% associate the divine with something that does not correspond to Christian God—a figure which much higher than the figures of the other profiles of spirituality.

The question where the “only religious” group could be placed on the hypothetical map is more complex, as this group divides into two sub-groups: those who associate the divine with the theistic God (50%) and those who associate it with the immanent “god within and in nature” (43%). It seems that two different issues are present in this group: the first is very much bound up with religious tradition, while the second is totally or partially disengaged from religion. The first sub-group is probably the most religiously conservative (even more conservative than the group who are “both religious and spiritual”); it is different from religious spiritualities in that the language of spirituality is rejected as being too deviant. The second sub-group is most likely to embrace ethic spiritualities. One would expect to find people here for whom belonging to Catholicism is more an ethnic and cultural rather than a religious membership.

**Table 8.** An hypothetical map of spirituality within the sacred in Italy.

	1 "only religious" (not spiritual)	2 "both religious and spiritual" (religious spirituality)	3 "only religious" (ethic spirituality)	4 "only spiritual" (inner self or inner life spirituality)
	God transcendent	God transcendent	god within	god within
orthodox position				heterodox position

640 Catholicism is relatively detraditionalised for them, but they nevertheless  
adhere to key 'Catholic' values which are underpinned by the Catholic belief  
that all human life is sacred—the God of human life-cum-Catholic values.  
Accordingly, in Table 8 the group is sub-divided into two, with each sub-group  
occupying a different position: the most conservative (those who associate the  
645 divine with the theistic God) are at one end of the spectrum and the second  
sub-group, who are most likely to embrace ethic spirituality, are between  
religious spirituality and inner-self or inner-life spirituality. Therefore, in  
Table 8, group 1 represents those who are "only religious" (not spiritual)—they  
believe in a transcendent God; group 2 are "both religious and spiritual"—they  
650 believe in a transcendent God; group 3 are "only religious", ethically spiritual—  
they believe in the "god within"; group 4 are "only spiritual"—they relate to  
inner-life spirituality and believe in the "god within".

This analysis raises further questions. We still have to understand the  
meaningful nature of the spiritual life of people who show forms of belief  
655 in God, which differ from the main choice of the group to which they belong.  
For instance, there are those who define themselves as "both religious and  
spiritual", but state belief in the "god within and in nature". Then there are  
those who are "neither religious nor spiritual" and believe in the theistic  
God as well and those who believe in the "god within and in nature". It is  
660 possible that people who are "neither religious nor spiritual", but believe  
in the "god within and in nature", might be thinking more in terms of 'ethic  
spirituality'. Yet they do not know the language of spirituality and thus do not  
refer to it.

Future research will need to make sure that questionnaires include multiple  
665 choice answers, both ranked and not ranked. Individuals might then state  
that they believe in different conceptions of God at one and the same time  
(for example, belief in the god within and the God without). This would allow  
for a much richer picture to emerge.

## Conclusion

670 The present research is a first attempt to explore—at both theoretical and  
empirical level—the distinction between religion and spirituality in Italy.  
Although alternative spiritualities might be regarded as a largely Protestant  
phenomenon, it has been shown that such spiritualities are also significant

within Italian Catholicism. However, even though it seems that Italians are now  
675 more interested in spirituality than they were in the past, the data do not lead to  
the conclusion that Italian Catholicism is giving way to unconventional  
spirituality. The statistical analysis which shows the percentages of Italians  
who claim to be “religious” and/or “spiritual” confirmed that there is much  
680 overlap between these two groups; this proves that in the Italian popular  
consciousness, religion and spirituality are not two different and incompatible  
worlds.

Regarding these findings, it is important to observe that, for the majority of  
Italians, the concept of ‘spirituality’ indicates an individual’s relationship  
with God and is focused on the personal, intimate, and subjective aspects of  
685 this relationship. The dimension of affectivity and emotion is where one can  
experience a profound and immediate unity with all that is absolute. This kind  
of spirituality is referred to as *intra-religious spirituality* (or ‘Catholic spirituality’),  
because it presumes that the religious experience is linked with the sacred which  
is and remains ‘external to’ and ‘higher’ than the individual (typically the  
690 Christian God).

At the same time, this study reveals that, undoubtedly, a form of  
unconventional spirituality (what might be called *extra-religious spirituality*),  
based on personal experience and associated with neither the church nor God  
as represented by theistic Christianity, is growing. The percentage of Italians who  
695 describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious—privileging the ‘God within’  
rather than the transcendent God of traditional Catholic belief—has been rising  
during the last decade.

Therefore, the data presented here strongly suggest that it is high time for  
Italian sociologists of religion to take on board the study of spirituality,  
700 in order to understand more clearly Italy’s religious and spiritual landscape,  
as it is presently in the process of reconstituting itself.

The present quantitative data will need to be supplemented with qualitative  
work, in order to specifically examine further what assortment of beliefs,  
practices, and activities falls into the category of ‘alternative spirituality’ and  
705 analyse whether people find a spiritual dimension in those activities (whether  
they are part and parcel of the secularisation process or able to sacralise social  
and even personal life). An underlying issue is whether unconventional  
spirituality in contemporary Catholicism is a symptom of secularisation, as  
Voas and Bruce (53) maintain; they argue that many participants of the holistic  
710 milieu do not consider their activities to be of spiritual significance. Or might  
spirituality be a durable counterforce to secularisation, as Heelas notes in “The  
Infirmary Debate” (232). He claims that the vast majority of those in the holistic  
milieu who consider themselves as ‘spiritual’ show an extraordinarily high  
interest in unconventional beliefs. This gives rise to a number of pressing  
715 questions which need to be addressed: does the phenomenon of spirituality  
draw attention to defects within Catholicism? Is its emergence affected by  
secularisation or by the rise of superstition? What can be said about the state  
of popular religion in Italy today?

There is thus much further work to be done, but this study furnishes valuable  
720 pointers to considerable religious change in Italy, of which very little has  
appeared in the Italian sociology of religion literature so far.



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## NOTES

1. *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project* was funded by CRT, the Italian Unicredit Bank's Private Foundation.
2. Profile of the sample (representative of the population as a whole in all the areas mentioned), regarding gender. Almost equal numbers of men and women represented, with just a slight bias in favour of women, corresponding to the Istat (National Statistical Institute) data updated on 1 January 2006. Regarding age, teenagers and young adults (aged 16–35) make up a little more than a third (34%) of the sample, while the largest group (39%) consists of adults (aged 36–55). Mature and elderly people (aged 56–74) represent under a third (27%) of the sample. Regarding education, half the interviewees (51%) completed only compulsory education (until age 14 in Italy). The remainder is composed of high-school leavers (36%) and university graduates (12%). Regarding marital status, two thirds of the sample are or were married (including those widowed/separated/divorced/re-married), while 30% are single and 4% are cohabiting. The majority of the sample have at least one child (61%). Around half (49%) have two children. Regarding religion, 86% of the interviewees identified themselves, at least nominally, as Catholic. The second largest group (9%) consists of respondents who identified themselves as having 'no religion'. The presence of 'other religions' amount to about 5%. 26% of Catholic respondents attend Mass at least once a week; 14% of them never.
3. A version of the present work, together with an analysis of contemporary Italian Catholicism, will be published in book form, in both Italian and English. Tables are taken from the report which I compiled for the Religion and Spirituality Project 2006.
4. Comparison will be made with two recent studies in particular: the project *Religiosity in Italy* of 1994, whose chief findings are published in Cesareo et al. and the Italian section of the RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism) survey of 1998, whose chief findings are published in Garelli, Guizzardi and Pace.
5. *Indagine Multiscopo 1999/2000*. The data in this study were collected by Istat (Italian National Statistical Institute) in 1999; the sample included about 30,000 families, representing 70,000 individuals.
6. See the web site of Associazione Italiana Operatori del Benessere (Italian Association of Wellness) at [www.aiob.it](http://www.aiob.it).
7. See my interviews with the *Intesa-Sanpaolo* top management during Summer 2007 (Palmisano).
8. See the project *Religiosity in Italy* of 1994, whose chief findings are presented in Cesareo et al. The data were collected in 1994, in a survey which covered all of Italy. The sample included 4,192 individuals and was representative of the Italian population of men and women whose ages ranged between the 16 and 74.
9. In removing the neutral value of 4 in one or both answers, we have chosen, for the purpose of convenience, to follow the method used by Barker in her analysis of RAMP data.
10. I refer mainly to attendance of mass, because 86% of Italians identify themselves, at least nominally, as Catholic.



11. The evidence I have provided cast doubt on the figures described in the *World Values Survey* of 1990 and 2000, which states that Italy is the only country where spirituality has been in decline since 1981.
12. The list of definitions was inspired by the list in Gallup and Jones (49). The original was modified to the Italian situation.
13. Principal Components Analysis of the questionnaire data demonstrates that three dimensions can explain 62% of the variance of responses. The first influences the variance for 26% of the respondents' selections, the second does so for 18%, and the third for 17%.

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